For centuries, feudalism was a way of life in Western Europe. Under feudalism, powerful lords divided their landholdings among vassals, or lesser lords, in exchange for service and loyalty. Everyone from the poorest peasant to the richest king was touched in some way by feudal relationships. In this excerpt from the 1200s, a vassal promises his loyalty to a more powerful lord. ♦ As you read, think about the different relationships that people can have with others. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.

A Vassal Pledges His Loyalty

I, John of Toul, make it known that I am the faithful man of the Lady Beatrice, Countess of Troyes, and of my most dear lord, Theobald, Count of Champagne, her son, against all persons living or dead, except for my allegiance to lord Enjorand of Coucy, lord John of Arcis and the count of Grandpré. If it should happen that the count of Grandpré should be at war with the countess and count of Champagne on his own quarrel, I will aid the count of Grandpré in my own person and will send to the count and countess of Champagne the knights whose service I owe them for the fief which I hold of them. But if the count of Grandpré shall make war on the countess and the count of Champagne on behalf of his friends and not in his own quarrel, I will aid in my own person the countess and count of Champagne, and will send one knight to the count of Grandpré for the service which I owe him for the fief which I hold of him, but I will not go myself into the territory of the count of Grandpré to make war on him.

Source: Institutions in European History, by Anthony Esler.

Questions to Think About

1. Which person in the excerpt is the vassal? Who are the greater lords?

2. If the count of Grandpré helped another person who had a quarrel with the count of Champagne, what did John of Toul pledge to do?

3. Analyze Information What weakness in the feudal system does John of Toul’s pledge show?

4. Activity Research the social levels or classes in one European country during feudal times, such as England, France, or Spain. Write a report describing each level in that society, including members and their roles or jobs.